

The Danny Ferry Record - Part II

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Thursday, September 25 2008 7:00 PM -

John checked in with an excellent piece yesterday morning, detailing and commenting on every move made by Danny Ferry since he took over as the Cavaliers General Manager in the summer of 2005. In today's conclusion of that piece, we link yesterday's installment and run the rest of the column, where we get John's analysis on Danny Ferry's performance as GM of our beloved Cavaliers.



[Click here for Part I of "The Danny Ferry Record"](#), where John details and comments on every move made by the Cavaliers GM since taking the position in the summer of 2005.

Analysis:

There have been two phases to Danny Ferry's tenure as Cavs' GM: the first summer, and everything since then. It is important to distinguish the two, and to recognize that the second phase is what we should expect from The Balded One in the future.

To understand Phase One (the summer of 2005), we have to remember what Ferry was facing as he took the reins of the Cavaliers:

1. He could be excused if he had whiplash. In the space of five days, he went

from winning a championship as a member of the San Antonio Spurs' front office, to interviewing for the Cavs' position, to accepting the role. He officially became the Cavs' GM on June 27, 2005. The 2005 NBA Draft was scheduled for the next day, on June 28th. Three days after that, the NBA's "moratorium" (French, for "you're not supposed to talk to pending free agents, but everybody does it, so you'd better be out there if you want to sign anybody") period began.

2. LeBron James was approaching the end of his rookie contract (he was eligible for free agency in the summer of 2007), and he could not have been terribly happy about the state of the team at that moment. The Cavs had just finished imploding, going from a near-certain playoff spot to going home in mid-April. The team had a new and largely unknown owner in Dan Gilbert. Coach Paul Silas had been fired during the season, and GM Jim Paxson had been let go after the campaign.

The team on the court wasn't much better. Aside from Ilgauskas, who had completed what seemed like his 300th consecutive season with the team, the Cavs had no consistency in their roster. Recent picks like Luke Jackson, DaJuan Wagner, and DeSagana Diop (believe it or not, *all of them were top ten picks in the draft;* I will pause here so you can throw up) had shown why the Cavs were in the lottery every year. The team had nothing at point guard, even less at shooting guard, and little depth.

3. The one thing that the Cavs did have, besides LeBron, was salary cap space. Paxson had departed his office with a couple of millstone contracts - namely Snow and Ira Newble - but otherwise, the team was in terrific shape financially. And they had a new owner with deep pockets. (It's the bladder theory of money. The more cash in the pot, the greater the urge to piss it away.) Gilbert knew that he needed to surround LeBron with some talent, or else LeBron would leave, and

cause Gilbert's investment to take a huge hit.

Those reasons help explain the summer of 2005, when Ferry spent free agent dollars like a trophy wife on Michigan Avenue. The signings of Hughes and Marshall were mostly praised; Jones, less so, as some questioned the wisdom of rewarding a journeyman with a lucrative four-year deal. But Ferry had little choice. He had to spend the money. He had to bring some talent into town. (Remember, the Cavs did not have any picks in the 2005 draft, thanks (*let's say it again*) to Paxson.)

My guess is that if we could get a couple of adult beverages into Ferry, he would admit that his moves during the summer of 2005 did not represent the type of GM he wanted to be. He probably would have admitted it at the time. He had to make a lot of decisions, and make them fast, without much time to deliberate.

And he made mistakes to learn from, specifically:

1. *Do not pay star dollars for less-than-star talent.*
2. *Do not overpay for average/slightly above average talent.*
3. *Keep the roster as cap-flexible as possible.*

Ferry learned these lessons quickly, and has not made the same mistakes since. Lesser GMs would have caved in during the Gooden, Varejao, and Pavlovic negotiations. Lesser GMs would have paid Gibson and West more money than they ultimately received. In all five of those cases, Ferry was holding a pair of aces - because those players were restricted free agents, Ferry knew that he could match any offers made for those players. He knew he had the upper hand, and he did not squander that advantage. He may have played hardball, especially with Varejao and Pavlovic last year, but that's much preferable to carrying a way-too-expensive player on the books for several years.

Ferry has also not signed a significant free agent since the initial splash in 2005. Only David Wesley has received more than a one-year contract, and his was a low-dollar deal, not a cap-choking one.

The result? The Cavs are now one of the top teams in the Eastern Conference, and are positioned to be one of those top teams for years to come. Most of the core players are young. James (23 years old), Williams (25), Varejao (26), West (25), Gibson (22), and Hickson (20) can all be expected to keep (or even improve) their level of performance for years; and several other potentially significant contributors in Jackson (22), Pavlovic (24), and Kinsey (24) are also rather young. In contrast, the other elite teams in the East - the Celtics and the

Pistons - are significantly older, and will have to be very adept at rebuilding on the fly if they are going to remain at the top.

The very interesting angle is what will happen in the summer of 2010. As it stands right now, the Cavs have less than \$20 million in salary commitments for that offseason, with Williams (\$9.3 million), Gibson (\$4.0 million), West (\$4.66 million), and Hickson (\$1.53 million) under contract then. The huge question is whether James will re-sign with the team. If he does, Ferry still has the cap flexibility to add another max contract-type player (and 2010 will be the ultimate market for free agents). If James decides to leave, the Cavs have the money to rebuild quickly, as they could sign two star players to complement the Williams-Gibson-West-Hickson core. *(No, I am not saying that James leaving is desirable; just that Ferry has positioned the team so that there can be a Plan B if LeBron decides that playing in front of Jay-Z for a losing team in Brooklyn is how he wants to spend the prime of his career.*
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Does the team's current position guarantee a title? Of course not. But thanks to Ferry, the Cavs are in a place to be a force for several seasons. As a sports fan, and as a Cleveland sports fan in particular, you really can't ask for much more.